

**Opening Statement of Republican Leader John Shimkus**  
**Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change Virtual Hearing**  
**“Pollution and Pandemics: COVID-19’s Disproportionate Impact on Environmental**  
**Justice Communities”**  
**June 9, 2020**

*As Prepared for Delivery*

Mr. Chairman, today’s hearing topic is especially timely given all the nation has confronted in recent weeks.

Amid the human toll of the pandemic, from disease and deaths and the unprecedented economic shutdown, our nation is now having raw and necessary conversations in response to George Floyd’s tragic and unnecessary death.

Against this backdrop, this hearing aims to explore the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on minority, low-income, and other disadvantaged communities around the nation.

I agree with the Chairmen’s comments announcing the hearing that we should focus on the resources to address the environmental and economic hardships the pandemic has laid bare.

Nobody should dispute the human toll when economic opportunity abandons communities.

February [testimony](#) this year from the Utility Workers Union of America described the harmful effects on families from the economic, social, and physical collapse of communities that follow the loss of good blue-collar, middle-class jobs, as factories pull out or power plants close.

Whether community collapse is from losing economic opportunity or not having the opportunity in the first place, the solution is the same: remove barriers and provide incentives to lift economic prospects for those most in need. This is the surest way to help people, their health, their environment.

The good news is there are practical policies and resources available to address some of the environmental issues, revitalization needs, and barriers to increasing economic opportunity for disadvantaged communities.

During the Subcommittee's [hearing](#) on this subject last fall, we examined how EPA works to help ensure these communities have the information and know-how to participate in local and state planning.

Witnesses provided [compelling examples](#) how EPA's technical assistance, [EJ grants](#), and [land revitalization](#) and Brownfields programs improve environmental quality and the economic prospects for communities—in large part by providing the front-end improvements that leverage tremendous amounts of additional, private economic investment.

It is a credit to this Committee's bi-partisan work updating the [Brownfields Program](#) that today we can look forward to increased economic progress for low-income, minority and other disadvantaged communities across the nation that use these tools.

In terms of the pandemic and the environment: We are a long way from having a full picture of the relationship of COVID and pollution on low-income or minority communities.

To be sure, CDC's official data show that there has been a disproportionate impact of [COVID-19 on black mortality overall, and in many states \(but not all states\)](#). And it is widely understood that pollution burdens can have a disproportionate impact on people with chronic underlying health problems like diabetes, asthma, cardiovascular disease, and on disadvantaged communities—given all the other factors that impact welfare and health care access.

But one-off studies should not prioritize how we address the problems.

[Congressional critics of the Administration have cited a](#) widely [reported](#), and [criticized](#), Harvard University study in early April to say EPA air quality decisions are off track. This study *hypothesized* that particulate matter levels increased COVID-19 risk, but even the unpublished paper's senior author told the [Washington Post](#) that this was preliminary and the study should not be used for policy making.

For Committee purposes, it is more helpful to take lessons from EPA's official annual air trends report, which was released yesterday. This shows continued reduction in air pollution around the nation. It reports a 40% reduction in the number of days listed as unhealthy for sensitive groups.

This demonstrates that allowing states to implement existing standards continues to drive cleaner air and is positive news for everyone. Let's focus on what works.

In the same way, programs to accelerate economic opportunity should also be allowed to make a difference.

For that reason, I would like to welcome Shay Hawkins today, president of the Opportunity Funds Association. Mr. Hawkins will talk about the great potential for the bi-partisan establishment of [Opportunity Zones](#), enacted in the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act to tie into existing programs in low-income and disadvantaged communities to attract the private capital necessary to assist economic development and jobs creation.

Mr. Hawkins can talk about how the program works, how can work with existing EPA programs, and what can be done to improve and expand it to better address the pressing issues confronting disadvantaged communities today.

This is the kind of bi-partisan program we should work with, to the benefit of all people and communities in need as we seek economic recovery. I look forward to the discussion.